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ABSTRACT

In America, a dichotomy of teaching philosophies which acknowledge the individual needs of children have produced approaches that are used in public school classrooms. The methods exemplify the dichotomous poles and combinations of both. These dichotomous teaching approaches are often referred to as the traditiónal methods or parts-specific approach and the whole language approach. This paper first describes the traditional approach, the roles of the student and teacher, and children's drawings as "windows of the mind." The paper then describes the wholistic approach, the role of student and teacher, and children's drawings in that context. Noting that educators realize that there are advantages and disadvantages to both of these extremes, the paper states that aspects from the culture from which the children come offer motivations and experience. It suggests that as teachers engage their students in educational pursuits, the more direct, contextual knowledge the teacheru have, the more genuine, personal teaching will take place. It also discusses some factors which can complicate educational efforts. Dichotomous language and art models are attached. (Contains 34 references.) (NKA)

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Presentation for the Chinese Students at Northern Jiaotong University

The Need for Culturally Rich Experiences as Children Learn to Read Write, Draw, and Communicate in American Education Today

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The Need for Culturally Rich Experiences as Children Learn to Read Write, Draw, and Communicate in American Education Today

As we enter the new millennium, our responsibility of educating our children has grown exponentially. In America, we acknowledge the individual needs of children and a dichotomy of teaching philosophies. These teaching philosophies have produced approaches that are used in the public school classrooms. The methods exemplify the dichotomous poles and combinations of both. (See the chart of the dichotomous continuum the page that follows).

We often refer to these dichotomous teaching approaches as the traditional methods or parts-specific approach and the whole language approach. We know from much research that children need to work in their chosen styles with success before trying ones that are counter to their preferences. However, students all eventually need to be able to use all varieties of learning styles and educational approaches. (Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2000; Ornstein, 1995; Zelmelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1993; Stone, 1999; Borich, 2000; Riner, 2000, and others.)

TRADITIONAL OR PARTS SPECIFIC APPROACH

Traditionally, we have taught reading and writing from one side of the dichotomy. Using this approach exclusively, we teach the alphabet, short words, simple sentences, and vocabulary from the needs of the child in the immediate environment. We use alphabet books, counting books, concept books. In other words, we teach specific parts first and then combine them in very simple ways. An example is the New England Primer that was used widely in 1680 to 1830 but was still in use in the 1900's in some parts of the country. (New England Primer was given to me by Ruth Peterson who used it in elementary schools in south Texas in the early 1900's.)

Also, we use reading textbooks called basal readers produced by large textbook companies. These basal readers are produced for an average of three groups for each grade level. They contain a development of language usage in a hierarchy of language skills with vocabulary from simple, short, commonly used words to complex, more specific and less commonly used words. Likewise, sentence patterns are short, simple and mostly declarative structural forms that are not like the regular speech patterns of commonly used spoken language forms.

ROLES OF THE STUDENT AND TEACHER

Children are seen as blank slates, or "tabula rasa" as John Locke termed it (Myers and Myers, 1995). They are not seen as having anything of value to contribute to their own education so it is the teacher's responsibility to make all decisions for the students about what they are to do and all aspects of the curriculum. It is the responsibility of the educator to fill the blank slates. Many of the early educational books produced were also didactic, intended to teach moral lessons as Jean Jacque Rousseau proposed, so the meaning was a simple moral, at times (Myers and Myers, 1995). At other times, the selections of words with similar sound patterns create repetition of a limited number of words into a poetry that is somewhat meaningless or

nonsensical. However, when combined with comic, imaginative illustrations, the book can be a more palatable learning tool. The whimsical characters in the phonetic poems of Dr. Seuss' books are good examples such as Dr. Seuss's A B C and The Foot Book in which 220 commonly used words were used. (Geisel and Geisel, 1963; Geisel and Geisel, 1968)

CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS AS WINDOWS OF THE MIND

Drawings often help teachers know what is in the mind of the child. These types of drawings are seen as non-verbal communication in early childhood and should never be aesthetically criticized. They are concrete examples of the progress of a child to make sense of his world and to allow the educator the understanding of a concrete demonstration of a developmental stage. All efforts must be made to keep this non-verbal communication spontaneous and fluent before the student develops the capability to communicate totally in a verbal manner. Analyzing the drawing process as well as the finished result gives the observant educator provides insight into the mind of the child and evidence to show preferential choice of each individual on the continuum of the dichotomous poles. (Lowenfeld, 1957; Beittel, 1973; Hurwitz and Day, 1995; Jalongo and Stamp, 1997; Bresler, 1999; Goldberg, 2001; Cherry, 1990; Wachowiak and Clements, 2001; and others).

The drawings used in this parts specific dichotomous method are used to illustrate the simple words and concepts in the hierarchy of pieces of information. The pictures are for a visual correspondence to the words. They have no personal meaning for the child but only are used to reinforce words chosen by educators. Teachers often produce materials or use those made by textbook companies rather than those produced by the children. Some of these materials are often very hard for children to understand because the images are abstract or are theimages of adults, not consistent with the imagery of a child in a particular developmental stage.

Today, teachers have access to computer programs that have thousands of examples of clip art or graphics that can be used for this visual reinforcement of words. The word-letter-image correspondence is new material determined by adults. Little if any is an exact replica of what the children may have experienced in their environment. A sample of a workbook image can be found in any public school classroom which illustrates that the cultural and developmental imagery of the child is ignored. The adult imagery is used which may or may not have any personal relevance for the child (Department of Education materials, 2000, p. 3)

From the parts-specific approach, the students do not have many if any choices. Educators determine the curriculum and what students must learn. Even though, generally, we have had success using that educational approach, we now must recognize alternative approaches and the needs of individual students for additional methods. Children need choices. (Nelson, Nelson Parish, 1999. ix, others.)

WHOLISTIC APPROACH

Although there are many combinations of both approaches on a continuum between the dichotomous poles, the alternative dichotomous position offers the most variety. The alternative methods allow students who do not respond well by the former traditional methods to experience great personal growth. This approach starts not with the curriculum created by educators or textbook companies but with the knowledge and language that children know and create through their own individual experiences.

ROLE OF STUDENT AND TEACHER

As students come to school, generally, they can talk about many things but do not have the knowledge of how to write and read all that they can speak. We refer to these processes of word-letter correspondence or word-image association. Students are encouraged to use invented spelling to begin to put some of their thoughts verbally into print. They are viewed by educators as great contributors and partners in the learning process. Teachers may provide vocabulary, but are sensitive to the needs of students and build on the knowledge that they already possess. Early efforts of invented spelling change as the student is exposed to more print in books and an environment rich with words, stories, examples, and extensions. An example of invented spelling is reproduced on the following page.

Teachers must know the students from a much deeper level than just providing them with graded curriculum and exercises. Complex stories are read to the children as the teacher attempts to find books and stories that will interest the specific children in that particular group. The efforts of the teacher are to create a love for literature so that they may be "hooked on books." The choices of one teacher may therefore vary from that of another teacher even though these teachers may both be teaching the same age and grade of students.

CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS AS WINDOWS OF THE MIND

Children also use lots of drawings to tell their stories in a non-verbal way. Teachers, parents, and teaching helpers often take dictation to put some of the thoughts of the child down into correct writing form but encourage the children to draw the illustrations. A variety of literature and stories are used orally to help the children gain a sense of story structure. Stories involve conflict, problems, and emotions to result in a clear imagery and empathic response. Ernst Kris refers to "the magic potency of imagery" as it allows an outlet for the imagination, for the subconscious, for the expressions of intense reactions that are socially acceptable (1952, p. 46.) The drawings communicate more than the syntactic, semantic, or graphophonic symbols can produce.

ALL POINTS ON THE CONTINUUM ARE NEEDED

Now, educators realize that there are advantages and disadvantages to both of these extremes. Also, as teachers evaluate their students, in an average group of 25 students, there is never a group that would exclusively benefit from only one method. Students are varied in so many unique ways with individual characteristics such as learning styles, language experience, prior knowledge, preferences, physical and mental capacities, and many more. Educators have a great responsibility to find what will intrinsically motivate each and every child. Educators must be willing to work with the child because they are really neither "blank slates" or fully capable to educate themselves without support, guidance, and knowledge of an experienced watchful educator.

TRUE CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR EXPERIENCE

Aspects from the culture from which the children come, offer motivations and experience. Most students feel they are knowledgeable of and value these aspects of culture. Teachers must have broad abilities so that they can teach each child from either dichotomous pole or any combination on a continuum anywhere between the two extremes. At the same time, educators must encourage personally meaningful choices that have value for the students. In teaching reading augmented with writing, drawing, and communication (listening and speaking), students can be drawn into a contextual world of imagery. Carefully chosen books written can be impetus for learning, books about personal lives and experiences of parallel aged characters imbedded in a detailed contextual setting. These books can truly activate not only interest but produce an emotional response, and even more importantly, a genuine empathic response.

Three representative samples of these types of books are Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Coerr, 1977); Masai and I, (Kroll and Carpenter, 1992); and The Black Pearl (O'Dell, 1967). There are many others with which children that appear to provide a genuine culturally rich experience, albeit vicariously. However, the more replication of elements in the book or actions to do some of the things that the characters in the stories did, the more educators can help students have empathic responses. Examples to describe the elements of story and representative activities include eating what the characters ate, trying on the costumes or typical dress of the characters, going to places in the book, talking to people who seem parallel to characters in the book, corresponding with the author, creating a book of their own either independently or collaboratively. To go one step further, the teachers can experience the full range of impact of the culture by as much direct experience as possible before trying to teach that cultural perspective. They can learn about individuals in the other cultures in context and have empathic responses, themselves. As they engage their students in educational pursuits, the more direct, contextual knowledge the teachers have, the more genuine, personal teaching will take place.

COMPLICATING FACTORS IN AMERICAN LIFE

To complicate educational efforts in America, obstacles exist. Ultimately, teachers must realize that there are aspects in our society that create diversity in students outside of the classroom. Some of our students have nurturing significant care-givers and others don't. We

know that students from the most dismal circumstances can succeed with resiliency with a consistent care-giver or mentor. Our culture has resulted in an almost 50% divorce rate resulting in many students arriving at school under-prepared and being latch-key kids in the afternoon. Sometimes, it is because the one parent with whom they live is at work; other times, it is because both parents work. There is a great risk for children who have no supervision from 3 to 6 in the afternoon. They are tempted to try substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. Unsupervised children also get into problems with underage sex, rape, and unwanted pregnancies. Gangs and violence in the neighborhoods are other sources of great anxiety and tension. Children under stress cannot do their best work. But, all students seem to be interested in learning about the true life issues of others in other parts of the world. Through this understanding, personal issues do not seem as overwhelming. Students get a sense of global realities and the human condition of others free of glib stereotypes (Stevens, 1999; Allington, 1998). With the broadening potentials of technology and electronic availability of information constantly being updated, there are no longer limits (Moursund, 1999).

With all of these things in mind, teachers must help guide students to do all the things that have been determined by the state of Washington to be consistent goals for all students called Essential Academic Learning Requirements. These are guidelines for developing curriculum so that all students may achieve the minimum outlined in the benchmarks for grades 4, 7, and 10. Some school districts have outlined more specific goals for every grade level that is a great help for teachers, parents, and administrators. (Fullman, 1999; Day, 1999; WWW.wa.standards.com.)

The methods teachers use to reach a mastery level on the benchmarks is often the responsibility of each individual teacher although some schools have developed peer groups or sub-groups within a school or a district. Teachers often have the freedom to choose the approach they use to get all of their students achieve the requirements. The need for a wide array of ways to assess the specific needs of each individual student and the methods to obtain the greatest success is more important than ever.

The areas of reading, writing, and communication are three of the eight parts of the curriculum or content areas. There are requirements for communication, reading, and writing in every one of the eight content areas. Without a mastery of reading and writing, a student cannot perform at a mastery level in any of the content areas. In mathematics, for example, only half of the points for a test of mastery come from a correct response to a problem. The other half comes from a verbal written explanation of the process. The students must be able to write with purpose, accuracy, and adequately describe all the steps of the process.

Teachers need to have a large repertoire of methods available to be able to keep each and every child totally engaged and industriously eager to learn. With a successful start in the early years, beginning with their preferences before stretching into unknown areas, students will love school, be willing to try new things, and work to the best that they can possibly be. We must keep culturally rich experiences available for students to acquire a level of empathic response that is significant. In that process, we will have students who ably can perform at the mastery level in all aspects of their educational experience in public schools in the state of Washington and in lifelong efforts.

DICHOTOMOUS LANGUAGE & ART MODELS

THE TRADITIONAL OR COMPETENCY MODEL:

- product is evaluated
- curriculum dependent on texts and test scores
- curriculum is fixed
- mastery of a hierarchy of skills and elements in a sequential order
- simplistic parts to the whole
- bottom-up approach
- basal readers and graded language arts textbooks
- pre-determined instructional activities
- workbooks and handouts
- drills and exercises
- logical, detached responses
- parts specific
- surface structure of language
- left-brain hemisphere specialization
- field independent
- Visual

THE WHOLE LANGUAGE OR PROCESS MODEL:

- process is evaluated
- curriculum is not pre-determined by texts or tests
- no specific text or tests
- curriculum is flexible
- language processes emerge as needed by individual students
- competencies of skill and content are individually based
- interests of students and teacher determine language learning experiences
- skill development is not rigidly hierarchical but by each student's need
- real, purposeful language activities
- no exercises or isolated drills
- emotional, affective, kinesthetic responses
- top-down approach is emphasized
- wholistic (holistic) methodology
- deep structure of language
- right-brain hemisphere specialization
- field-dependent
- Haptic

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